

GARLEN ESЛИCK

Garlen Eslick, raised in Bristow and living now in Amarillo, Texas, was on kitchen duty.

"I was fixing vegetables," Eslick said. "Myself and another boy named Tanner were sitting one deck below the main deck. We had two vats we were chopping vegetables into. I heard this popping noise and looked out. All of a sudden, I could see splinters coming up on

Eslick's battle station was four decks down in a powder handling room.

"I got about two decks down, and we took our first three torpedoes," Eslick said. "It knocked me off my feet and banged me around a little. I did manage to get into my powder handling room. Just as I got in there, we took two more hits suddenly."

With those hits, another sailor in the room was injured.

"He had hurt his leg, and the ship was already beginning to capsize," Eslick said. "Another sailor and I were trying to get him out. Just as soon as we got this injured sailor in the hatch, the ship completed its roll and caught him in the hatch. That's the last thing I remembered."

The injured sailor was killed. Eslick was knocked out cold.

"I came to in water," Eslick said. "I knew we were upside down. I tried to find a place where I could get out. The ship was almost totally upside down. I don't know how long I sat there and waited."

As the sailors waited, the water continued to rise. After another sailor brought a dim lantern light, Eslick swam to another compartment where there was a ladder that led to the main deck. Two of the sailors in this compartment decided to swim for it. The others tied their clothes together to form a safety line.

Neither of the men came back.

Hours passed. After tapping out SOS messages in Morse code, rescuers finally found where the men were trapped. The rescuers used pneumatic tools to cut through the bulkhead. It was after 11 a.m. Monday when the 11 men were finally pulled from the ship.

"Why them?"

The men had heard explosions from nearby ships, but Eslick said he was not prepared for the sight that greeted him when he reached the surface.

"We hadn't seen daylight for 27 hours," Eslick said. "It took a while for us to be able to see. After a minute, you could see ships burning and fuel oil. It was one of the worst things I've ever seen. All of a sudden, your world was literally turned upside down. You could see motor boats picking up the dead."

The attack left 18 U.S. warships sunk or seriously damaged. Men were rescued from the Oklahoma as late as Tuesday. Berger said men on the battleship USS West Virginia survived even longer.

Men down in lower decks stayed alive until Dec. 23 and finally died right before Christmas, Berger said. "They tapped Morse code on the ship, but there was no way to get them out without flooding it."